

12-1-2005

Smoke and Mirrors: Internalizing the Magic Lantern Show in *Villette*

Diane Hoeveler

Marquette University, diane.hoeveler@marquette.edu

Diane Long Hoeveler, "Smoke and Mirrors: Internalizing the Magic Lantern Show in *Villette*"

With considerable historical background in mind, I would like to examine a number of the stock gothic tropes, including the mysterious nun, the paintings of women, the theater scene, and the fête in *Villette* as examples of not simply one of last gasps of high Victorian gothicism, but also of the internalization and critique of gothic theatrical technology. As Castle observes, the "phantasmagoria should [have] become a kind of master trope in nineteenth-century romantic writing," and certainly she applies the representation in provocative ways to the symbols and imagery in Thomas Carlyle's *French Revolution*. In a similar fashion, I would like to read Brontë's novel as a transmutation of the phantasmagoria to the novel form, a translation of a theatrical topos into the novelistic universe. Doing so allows us to see both the cultural persistence and permeability of gothic conventions, at the same time it enables us to appreciate that Brontë must have been assuming a shared theatrical knowledge in her reading audience. Critics have persistently faulted the novel for its "unreliable narrator" (Knies) and its "odd structure" (Martin); however, an understanding of how Brontë uses and critiques the theatrical machinery of her era actually works to clarify both the purpose and the structure of the novel. It has become conventional to describe the central conflict in the novel as one between "Reason" and "Imagination" in the personality of Lucy Snowe, the narrator. But a materialist interpretation of the work finds a much larger issue at stake.

1. I. SMOKE

Perception, or the action by which we perceive, is not a vision...but is solely an inspection by the mind....

*It is possible that I do not even have eyes with which to see anything....
I will now shut my eyes, I shall stop my ears, I shall disregard my senses.*

—René Descartes, *Second Meditation*, II, 21-24

2. When someone screams "Fire!" (325) during a theatrical performance in Charlotte Brontë's final novel, *Villette* (1853), her contemporary reading audience would have had their worst fears confirmed. Attendance at a theatrical event in mid-nineteenth-century Europe could be a potentially fatal adventure, one undertaken only after fully and carefully assessing the risks involved. Brontë herself, of course, was so sensitive to visual spectacle that she wept at her first sight of the North Sea. Notoriously near-sighted, she was throughout her life drawn to theatrical extravaganzas, no matter how much risk was involved. We know, for instance, that she apparently saw the following plays on the following dates: *The Barber of Seville* sometime in 1848 (Peters 225); *Othello* and *MacBeth* sometime between 1849-50 (Gordon 210-211); Legouver's *Adrienne Lecouvreur* starring Rachel on June 7, 1851; Corneille's *Les Trois Horaces* also starring Rachel on June 21, 1851 (Gaskell 556n); and *Twelfth Night* on April 25, 1853 (Gaskell 437). And certainly it has long been common knowledge that Brontë modeled her portrait of *Villette*'s *Vashti* on Rachel (Gordon 238; Gerin 481-82; Fraser 405) so that when Brontë's interest in the theater is discussed, it has generally been concerned with

her depiction of Vashti as a gothic tragic heroine (cf. Hoeveler, 1998; 232). The material realities of theatrical performances that come into full and very alarming view with that sudden scream of "Fire" have not, as yet, been discussed.

3. In fact, the growth of European theatrical entertainments was fairly sudden. A competitive sphere in which theaters competed with each other for the ever increasing market of artisans with disposable income quickly developed due to the realities of a market economy. In addition, theater managers who wanted to remain competitive had to keep pace in their use of pyrotechnics and other devices that would continue to "shock and awe" their audiences. As Baksheider has noted, the growth of the minor theaters as a mass form of popular entertainment required "the bombardment of the senses and the use of techniques that fixed manipulative tableaux in the audiences' memories." Intense activity on stage alternated with *tableaux vivants*, and the designers of these extravaganzas intended to create what was known as *Stimmung*, "moments when a landscape seems charged with alien meaning, or what we would recognize as romantic epiphany" (Baksheider 169).
4. As attendance at theaters increased throughout the nineteenth century, the technologies involved in stagecraft had to improve, and advancements in lighting, stage machinery, setting, and sound effects were all of major importance in the spectacularization of theatrical fare. In 1815 Covent Garden opened for the first night of its new season, proudly announcing that "The Exterior, with the Grand Hall and Staircase will be illuminated by Gas." The Olympic Theater followed suit the next month, and in 1817 Drury Lane and the Lyceum both installed gas lighting (Rees 9). It was not long before the gradual development of "gas tables" or "gas floats" allowed theatrical managers to control the intensity of light in separate areas of the stage during a performance.
5. Limelight was first used in 1837 at Covent Garden by heating a block of quicklime so that it would create a bright spotlight effect on the stage. Such developments extended Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg's early work with colored lights for his Eidophusikon (1781), a miniature theater on Panton Street, off Leicester Square. As Ranger notes, information no longer exists that would allow us to know exactly how he created his lighting effects, but we do have descriptions by his contemporary, the artist W. H. Pyne (1769-1843), who left a detailed description of one of the scenes exhibited at the Eidophusikon, "dawn breaking over London" (Ranger 70). Serving as the design coordinator of Drury Lane from 1773-1781 and under the management of David Garrick, Loutherbourg was responsible for, as he put it, "all which concerns the decorations and machines dependent upon them, the way of lighting them and their manipulation" (qtd Ranger 86). We also know that Loutherbourg mounted a batten of lamps above the proscenium that threw all its light on the scene while in front of the lamps he placed stained glass chips of yellow, red, green, purple and blue, all of which rotated, changing and mixing as the altering atmospheric changes required (Altick 123). When Pyne went to review the Eidophusikon¹ for one of his newspaper articles, he praised what he called the "the picturesque of sound" that Loutherbourg had developed for the facility. Lightning, thunder, rushing water waves, and the groans of devilish spirits trapped on the burning lake of hell were his particular specialties (qtd Altick 124), according to Pyne. This same sort of synaesthesia is evident when we consider how light and optical effects were combined in the stage directions for Henry M. Milner's *Alonzo the Brave, or The Spectre Bride*, a 1826 theatrical production based on Matthew Lewis's

eponymous ballad in *The Monk*: "The figures cast back their mantles and display the forms of Skeletons! ... a strong red light fills the back of the cavern" (qtd Rees 150). Very quickly, however, fire followed gas, and fires in theaters became an occupational hazard for theater personnel as well as audience members. Fires completely destroyed the Royal Circus in 1805, the Royal Brunswick theater in 1828, and the Lyceum Theater in 1830 (Moody, 35; 37; 41). But perhaps one of the most famous and notorious cases was the death of Clara Webster, a ballerina who was burned to death while performing in full view of the audience at Drury Lane in 1844 (Rees 156).

II. MIRRORS

The relationship of emulation enables things to imitate one another from one end of the universe to the other...by duplicating itself in a mirror the world abolishes the distance proper to it; in this way it overcomes the place allotted to each thing. But which of these images coursing through space are the original images? Which is the reality and which is the projection?

—Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 19

6. In December, 1781, ten years after first arriving in London to work for David Garrick, Louthembourg was invited to pay a visit to Fonthill Abbey, the estate of William Beckford. Louthembourg had been hired to transform Beckford's mansion into "a labyrinthine and necromantic environment for a three-day Christmas performance-masquerade" (Ziter 19), a transformation that was so effective and dramatic that Beckford himself described the event as "the realization of romance in all its fervours, in all its extravagance...I wrote *Vathek* immediately upon my return to London at the close of this romantic villegiatura" (qtd Altick 122n). Although no detailed description of this "villegiatura" survives, Boyd Alexander has proposed that Louthembourg's chief contribution to the entertainments was taken from the Pandemonium scene in his *Eidophusikon* program (83-84), described by viewers who saw it later in London:

Here, in the fore-ground of a vista, stretching an immeasurable length between mountains, ignited from their bases to their lofty summits, with many-colored flame, a chaotic mass rose in dark majesty, which gradually assumed form until it stood, the interior of a vast temple of gorgeous architecture, bright as molten brass, seemingly composed of unconsuming and unquenchable fire. (qtd Altick 123)

7. The exteriorization of Miltonic tropes found its way into *Vathek* in perhaps no less dramatic ways, and if Louthembourg inadvertently provided the visual stimulus for the creation of *Vathek*, he was also without doubt one of the most important pioneers in the development of optical entertainments, as his 1781 *Eidophusikon* produced a new and exciting visual experience for the London theater-going public. A miniaturized optical extravaganza, the *Eidophusikon* reproduced settings from the entire Mediterranean world that were then shown in conjunction with lighting effects that went from sunrise to moon glow to fire and storm. Using rear-lit transparencies, colored plates, a variety of fabrics, and panoramic dioramas, the *Eidophusikon* created in its viewers a heightened level of

visual excitement and sophistication and established a new standard that the British theater-going public came to expect (Ziter 19).

8. Twenty years later, in 1801, the famous physician-balloonist Etienne-Gaspard Robertson arrived in Britain from France to present his "Gothic extravaganzas" for the public, and he was welcomed as a sensation but not a particularly new one. Robertson's originality as a stage-crafter was not in his conception, but in his more technically sophisticated use of mechanically projected images, set off one after another and accompanied by eerie music and lighting effects. Honing his skills in the deserted cloister of the Capuchins in Paris, Robertson had transformed the space into a "theater of the macabre" (Stafford and Terpak 301). Relying on sheets stretched from one end of the cloister to the other, Robertson mounted his "fantascope," a large magic lantern that was able to slide back and forth on a double track and project images on the screen from behind. These images could increase or decrease in size, but their subject matter was the major focus of the show: "looming ten-foot-high, bisexual, horned and web-footed devils," "the head of Medusa, a bloody nun, the tomb of the recently executed French king Louis XVI,...and the ghost of the abbess Heloise" (Castle 144-50; Stafford and Terpak 301). When he wasn't displaying the "Dance of the Witches" or "The Ballet of the Mummies," Robertson was creating other images that were then projected on clouds of smoke and accompanied by eerie music played on a glass harmonica, said to have been invented by Benjamin Franklin (Stafford and Terpak 303).
9. As Stafford and Terpak have noted, however, the art of projected images actually dates back to the seventeenth century (297), while Crary situates the origins of the magic lantern show in the discovery of the camera obscura in 1671 as developed by the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680). According to Crary, "Kircher devised techniques for flooding the inside of the camera with a visionary brilliance, using various artificial light sources, mirrors, projected images, and sometimes translucent gems in place of a lens to simulate divine illumination" (33). Ironically, what began as a counter-reformation Roman Catholic demonstration of "divine illumination" became over time an emblem of the more interior, private, Protestant belief in a personal God.
10. But the camera obscura's most dramatic use was its ability to produce flickering images within its narrow confines, for instance, either simulating branches moving in the wind or of people walking along the street. As Crary notes, "movement and time could be seen and experienced, but never represented" (34), and hence the camera obscura "is inseparable from a certain metaphysic of interiority: it is a figure for both the observer who is nominally a free sovereign individual and a privatized subject confined in a quasi-domestic space, cut off from a public exterior world" (39). It is precisely this interiorizing aspect of the camera obscura/magic lantern show that I want to examine in Brontë's novel. The isolated heroine Lucy Snowe can be seen as one of modernity's first artificially isolated, privatized subjects, detaching the act of seeing from the physical body in order to decorporealize vision. What Crary calls the "monadic viewpoint of the individual" is "authenticated and legitimized by the camera obscura, but the observer's physical and sensory experience is supplanted by the relations between a mechanical apparatus and a pre-given world of objective truth" (39-40). But, as Crary observes, "the body then is a problem the camera could never solve except by marginalizing it into a phantom in order to establish a space of reason" (41). Analogously, it was precisely the physical body that Brontë elided in her final novel.

11. To return to the magic lantern, though, it is necessary to focus on its typical and fairly crude subject matter. It presented to viewers a series of shocking figures derived from such stock gothic representations as the bleeding nun, skeletons, or ghosts, all of them adapted by Robertson in France during the Revolution and then brought over by him to London to wide acclaim. Earlier, however, on December 16, 1792, the German physician Paul Philidor advertised a performance of his "Phantasmagorie" in the *Journal de Paris*. In a production that mocked the still-living revolutionaries Robespierre, Danton, and Marat—all of whom were depicted as having claws, horns, and tails, Phillidor's exhibition was a daring and dangerous activity in the midst of politically uncertain times. But if the magic lantern show had a political context, it also had a religious and scientific one as well. As Castle notes, the producers of these early phantasmagorias frequently presented themselves as intent on serving the public interest by exposing frauds or charlatans who preyed on those easily duped into believing their own misguided senses: "ancient superstition would be eradicated when everyone realized that so-called apparitions were in fact only optical illusions. The early magic-lantern shows developed as mock exercises in scientific demystification" (143).
12. In February 1802, a Belgian showman, Paul de Philipstal, staged his "phantasmagoria" in London at the Lyceum, and William Nicholson was in the audience to provide this eyewitness account:

All the lights of the small theatre of the exhibition were removed, except one hanging lamp, which could be drawn up so that its flame should be perfectly enveloped in a cylindrical chimney, or opaque [sic] shade. In this gloomy and wavering light the curtain was drawn up, and presented to the spectator a cave or place exhibiting skeletons, and other figures of terror, in relief, and painted on the sides or walls. After a short interval the lamp was drawn up, and the audience were in total darkness, succeeded by thunder and lightning; which last appearance was formed by the magic lanthorn upon a thin cloth or screen, let down after the disappearance of the light, and consequently unknown to most of the spectators. These appearances were followed by ghosts, skeletons, moving their eyes or mouths by the well known contrivance of two or more sliders. (Nicholson, qtd Rees 81)

13. In a strange homage to Ben Franklin, Philipstal displayed the floating head of Franklin "being converted into a skull," and then followed this shocking sight with a display of "various terrific figures, which instead of seeming to recede and then vanish, were (by enlargement) made suddenly to advance; to the surprise and astonishment of the audience, and then disappear by seeming to sink into the ground" (Castle 150). The magic lantern quickly became a staple of popular, artisan entertainments, so popular in fact that easy to assemble magic lantern kits for middle-class children were sold all over England (Castle 154). The magic lantern was not used in legitimate theatrical productions, however, until 1820, when Edmund Kean appeared as Lear at Drury Lane (Rees 84). As Emma Clery has suggested, however, the magic lantern shows reveal how quickly the frightening can degenerate into parody given enough repetitions, which was exactly what occurred in fairly short order on the British stage (Clery 146).

14. Early nineteenth-century London also saw a dramatic increase in theatrical productions, largely resulting from the new and broader interpretations given to the Licensing Act of 1737. Originally, this act had created a theatrical monopoly for the two royal theaters (called patent theaters) in London—Drury Lane and Covent Garden—with a sort of loophole for the existence of the Haymarket, which was allowed to stage plays during the summer months. But in the early nineteenth century the theatrical legislation was reinterpreted to allow other and minor theaters to exist as long as they did not present dramas (which were defined as performances of spoken dialogue only). As Moody notes in her study of "illegitimate theater" in London, it was the political culture of the 1790s, the fall of the Bastille and England's war against Napoleon, that "provided the iconographic catalyst for the rise of an illegitimate drama. This theatre of physical peril, visual spectacle and ideological confrontation challenged both the generic premises and the cultural dominance of legitimate drama" (10). And as we have seen, technologies of visual spectacle developed to complement the "illegitimate" productions of melodrama, the gothic, pantomimes, burlettas, and various quadraped extravaganzas. The minor theaters for the most part confined themselves to melodramatic works, which by necessity included musical numbers, sung discourse (much in the tradition of operatic recitative), and military, nautical, and pantomimic fare. By 1843, with the revocation of the Licensing Act, there were twenty-one theaters in London alone, in addition to a number of optical entertainments such as panoramas carrying on the tradition of the Eidophusikon (Ziter, 20-21).
15. With this background in mind, I would like to examine a number of the stock gothic tropes, including the mysterious nun, the paintings of women, the theater scene, and the fête in *Villette* as examples of not simply one of the last gasps of high Victorian gothicism, but also of the internalization and critique of gothic theatrical technology. As Castle observes, the "phantasmagoria should [have] become a kind of master trope in nineteenth-century romantic writing," and certainly she applies the representation in provocative ways to the symbols and imagery in Thomas Carlyle's *French Revolution*. In a similar fashion, I intend to read Brontë's novel as a transmutation of the phantasmagoria to the novel form, a translation of a theatrical *topos* into the novelistic universe. Doing so allows us to see both the cultural persistence and permeability of gothic conventions, and at the same time it enables us to appreciate that Brontë must have been assuming a shared and broad theatrical knowledge in her reading audience. Critics have persistently faulted the novel for its "unreliable narrator" (Knies) and its "odd structure" (Martin); however, an understanding of how Brontë uses and critiques the highly visual theatrical machinery of her era actually works to clarify both the purpose and the structure of the novel. It has become conventional to describe the central conflict in the novel as one between "Reason" and "Imagination" in the personality of Lucy Snowe, the narrator. But a materialist interpretation of the work finds a much larger issue at stake.
16. M.H. Abrams's classic study *The Mirror and the Lamp* defined the historical and literary circumstances surrounding the shift in the early nineteenth century from the mimetic theory of perception to the projective. Ernest Tuveson has further observed that the mimetic theory culminates in Locke's *Essay*, which places an observer in the center of the mind. According to Locke, the mind functions as a mirror that can neither alter nor influence the images that are reflected upon it. The new theory of projective perception, symbolized by the lamp, made the perceptive faculties active, expressive, and creative.

Nonetheless, both theories especially stressed the visual faculty; in fact, Tuveson observed that the eye gained ascendancy over analysis and understanding, or the rational intellect, in our involvement with the external world. Because all ideas are images or pictures in the mind, understanding became a form of visual perception (73). For Castle, "nineteenth-century empiricism frequently figured the mind as a kind of magic lantern, capable of projecting the image-traces of past sensation onto the internal 'screen' or backcloth of the memory" (144). But the magic lantern was also associated in the public theatrical consciousness with magic and superstition, and while claiming on the surface that the mind was a machine that could be controlled, the other message that was being conveyed sub-rosa was that the mind was actually a "phantom-zone, given over, at least potentially, to spectral presences and haunting obsessions. A new kind of daemonic possession became possible" (144). But how does this bifurcation of attitudes toward the mind explain the fascination with the phantasmagoria, the sense that the visual itself is suspect, subject to manipulation and even cheaper forms of deception?

17. Relying on Foucault, Crary charts the progression of the interiorization of perception from the discovery of the camera obscura to its use as a metaphor by Descartes, Locke, Kant, Condillac, and Goethe, and he cites Foucault on the camera obscura as "a form of representation which made knowledge in general possible":

The site of analysis is no longer representation but man in his finitude....It was found that knowledge has anatomo-physiological conditions, that it is formed gradually within the structures of the body, that it may have a privileged place within it, but that its forms cannot be dissociated from its peculiar functioning; in short, that there is a nature of human knowledge that determines its forms and that at the same time can be manifest to it in its own empirical contents. (Foucault, 319).

Foucault locates the eye firmly in the body. Earlier, Goethe also believed that it was crucial to connect the subjective component of perception with the physiological, a position that was elaborated on by the French philosopher Maine de Biran whose early nineteenth-century theory of the "*sens intime*" was an attempt to assert the primacy of interior experience (Crary 72). For both Goethe and Maine de Biran, subjective observation cannot be understood as a theater of representations, but instead as a product of increasing exteriorization: "the viewing body and its objects begin to constitute a single field on which inside and outside are confounded"; "the soul is necessarily incarnated [so] there is no psychology without biology" (Crary 73).

18. This bifurcation between the mind and the body was also famously played out in Charles Lamb's essay "On Garrick, and Acting; and the Plays of Shakespeare, considered with reference to their fitness for Stage Representation" (1811). What Wood has labeled the "classical iconophobia" of Coleridge and Hazlitt can be seen as well in Lamb, who condemned the theater as an inferior venue because of its reliance on the purely visual: "What we see upon a stage is body and bodily action; what we are conscious of in reading is almost exclusively the mind, and its movements" (qtd Wood 22). And, as Castle has noted, romanticism as a genre "owes much to the new belief in the reality of mental objects," while nineteenth-century philosophies like skepticism "may likewise

arise out of a similar emotional shift toward the phantasmatic" (137). For Castle the impetus for such a transformation occurs because this society was moving away from a firm belief in an afterlife and an attendant and beneficent supernatural deity who controlled our lives. It is also possible to see that these changes could be due to the transformations that are made when an oral-based culture modernizes and increasingly privileges the written word. Then the visual spectacles of Louthenbourg and his cohorts on the London stage become manifestations of this new "spectralizing habit in modern times...our compulsive need to invent machines that mimic and reinforce the image-producing powers of consciousness. Only out of a deep preference for the phantoms of the mind have we felt impelled to find mechanical techniques for remaking the world itself in spectral form" (Castle 137).

III. PHANTASMAGORIC FEMALE BODIES

Phantasmagoria: A shifting series or succession of phantasms or imaginary figures, as seen in a dream or fevered condition, as called up by the imagination, or as created by literary description.

—*Oxford English Dictionary*

19. Women float in and out of view in Brontë's novel, and some of them appear to be living (and are not) and some of them appear to be dead (and are not). Some of them, in fact, are not even women. I would assert at the outset that there is a good deal of intense uneasiness about the role and nature of women in this novel. The ghostly nun who appears three times in the text suggests one of the most persistent tropes in the gothic repertoire, the sexually disgraced female victim. Or she is the mother who has been murdered, displaced, or unjustly separated from her children. Such a representation suggests a conservative ideological position on the part of Brontë, and certainly women in her novel are being positioned front and center in their maternal roles. I would contend that the gothic visual aesthetic presupposes a masculine subject who has been dazzled, not simply by an eroticization of the female body, but also by the woman's maternal function, and I am thinking here of Lewis's ambivalent presentation of Mathilda/Rosario in *The Monk* or Maturin's presentation of Isidora in *Melmoth the Wanderer*. In addition, the aesthetics of the sublime presupposes a female subject position disciplined through the presence of the male gaze (Miles 51)—or what I would call the bourgeois gaze. The mass audiences that flocked to such gothic dramas as Boaden's *Fountainville Forest* or Lewis's *The Castle Spectre* remembered the ghost scenes most vividly because those were the most visually dramatic, the most frightening, the most uncanny appearances of the dead/undead mother on the stage.
20. Brontë begins the novel with her heroine Lucy in complete control of the magic lantern show in her head. When Polly Home arrives at the Bretton household, Lucy looks at her luggage and asks, "Of what are these things the signs and tokens?" (7). She proceeds to watch and observe Polly in order to begin to understand this new object on her horizon. In fact, to this early Lucy human beings are purely objects of literal appearance. She never betrays her emotions; alas, she has been so successfully socialized that she has learned that the display of emotion in a woman is as unseemly as it is

redundant. During the emotional farewell to Polly's father, which surely recalls Lucy's own loss of her parents and guardians and her own repressed fear of abandonment, Lucy prides herself on her learned characteristic behavior: "I, Lucy Snowe, was calm" (26). Brontë structures the work so that we see the gradual phantasmagoric effect on the frozen psyche that is Lucy. Throughout the first half of this novel Lucy continues in the stance of an objective observer and is content with inhabiting the "watch-tower of the nursery, whence I . . . made my observation" (92). Even after her involvement in the school play, Lucy retreats into a corner where "unobserved I could observe . . . all passed before me as a spectacle" (175). But Lucy would appear to be inhabiting a dream world of her own making.

21. Gradually, however, Lucy loses control of the very staid magic lantern show that she has made of her existence. The first clearly phantasmagoric scene occurs when Lucy is left alone in the school to tend a retarded child, a "cretin" whose physical situation eerily mirrors Lucy's emotional infantilism. Breaking down under the strain, Lucy experiences a vision of "ghastly, white beds" which become "specters" with "wide gaping eyeholes" (198). These floating white beds exist only in Lucy's mind as manifestations of a gothic phantasmagoric machinery, and surely Brontë here is trying to conjure up for her reading audience a visual image of hauntings and ghosts that were in prominence on the stage since the productions of Boaden and Lewis in the late 1790s.
22. What becomes the second and perhaps the most dramatic manifestation of the magic lantern show occurs when Lucy encounters what she thinks is a spectral nun. The first time the nun appears Lucy has retreated to read the innocent letter she has received from Graham Bretton, very self-consciously positioning herself in a gothic ambience reminiscent of Radcliffe's Ellena or Emily reading by a flickering candle. Setting the stage for this particular gothic tableaux, Lucy tells us to imagine her, "[t]he poor English teacher in the frosty garret, reading by a dim candle guttering in the wintry air, a letter simply good-natured--nothing more" (305). But this deflation of the gothic staple, the letter read by candlelight, is suddenly re-envisioned with the abrupt insertion of the phantom nun. To appreciate the cues that Brontë is providing for her reader, who she hopes will recreate the magic lantern effect of the scene, I cite it in full:

Are there wicked things, not human, which envy human bliss? Are there evil influences haunting the air, and poisoning it for man? What was near me?...Something in that vast solitary sounded strangely. Most surely and certainly I heard, as it seemed, a stealthy foot on that floor: a sort of gliding out from the direction of the black recess haunted by the malefactor cloaks. I turned: my light was dim; the room was long—but, as I live! I saw in the middle of that ghostly chamber a figure all black or white; the skirts straight, narrow, black; the head bandaged, veiled, white. Say what you will, reader—tell me I was nervous, or mad; affirm that I was unsettled by the excitement of that letter; declare that I dreamed: this I vow—I saw there—in that room—on that night—an image like—a NUN. (306)

So is Brontë describing a nun or something like a nun? And what would something like a nun be, a ghost of a nun? Female ghosts had actually become stock presences on the British stage by the early nineteenth century. When Matthew Lewis introduced a female

ghost into his gothic drama *The Castle Spectre* (1797) he was roundly criticized, although James Boaden was actually the first gothic dramatist to use a floating female ghost in his production of *The Fountainsville Forest* (1794). In addition, nuns or ghosts of nuns were also stock figures in the gothic repertoire (cf. Hoeveler, 2000; 169-72). Lewis's gothic drama *Raymond and Agnes* (1809) focused on the legend of the bleeding nun that he had incorporated into his earlier novel *The Monk*, but the legend was actually a transmutation of the earlier Germanic demon lover ballad. In Lewis's play Agnes is being held captive in Lindenberg Castle and, with the assistance of Raymond, makes her escape disguised as the Ghost of the Bleeding Nun, a legend that the family continued to evoke years after the original nun's death. The plot becomes complicated when the ghost herself actually does make an appearance, and the material uneasily coexists with the ephemeral in an uncanny dance of the undead with the living (a technique mimicked by Joanna Baillie in her gothic drama *Orra*). Both Lewis's play and Boaden's earlier *Fountainsville Forest* relied on the same visual technique: a sheet of gauze producing a blue-grey haze and hanging between the audience and the ghost. As Ranger notes, the effect was achieved by using the green halves of the shades of the Argand lamps that were placed in the wings of the stage (76). Again, in the Brontë passage cited above we are clearly being invited to recall a theatrical ambience of magical effects: "influences haunting the air" or the flickering light, vague and ominous sounds, and finally the appearance of a nun, floating like an optical illusion on the "stage" of our reading mind. Notice also how this description of "an image" is qualified even further by the word "like." This is not a nun, but it is something like a nun, something like a nun conjured up on stage as part of a magic lantern show.

23. The particular nun who supposedly haunts the Pensionnat Beck is a woman who was, according to legend, buried alive in a vault under the Methuselah pear-tree "for some sin against her vow" (131). Later we learn that M. Paul's beloved Justine-Marie entered the convent when her marriage to Paul was prevented for financial reasons. In fact, we are told that she died and that Paul is the guardian of a girl named Justine-Marie who could very well be his natural daughter, born of his abortive affair with the first Justine-Marie, perhaps another wayward and sexual nun. When Dr. John attempts to question Lucy about the nun he asks, "'Was it a man? Was it an animal? What was it?'" (310; Brontë's emphasis). To the rational Dr. John the nun can only be a "spectral illusion" or an "optical illusion" (312; 321). That is, he refuses to acknowledge that existence can have any drama or theater in it.
24. The mad or bleeding nun,—a central trope of the female gothic tradition and one that Lucy is loath to renounce,—recurs here as a living manifestation of the magic lantern show. The lives of monks and nuns were also, however, the stuff of the hysterical, anti-Catholic England of Brontë's youth. Several communities of displaced monks and nuns were living in remote private houses in Lancashire and Dorset and were alternately the subjects of pity and horror by their British neighbors after they were expelled from France during the Revolution. A contemporary British traveler to Italy, Samuel Rogers, witnessed an initiation ceremony at a convent in Rome, and he noted later that a young and beautiful Italian woman could find herself one day at the opera and the next shut up for life in a convent, with nothing to hear but the tolling bell to call her to endless prayers (qtd Ranger 61).

25. The second appearance of the phantom nun occurs after Lucy has decided to give up her infatuation with Graham and bury his letters under the Methuselah pear-tree. But before she can move to that higher level of repression or regression, Lucy confronts the nun once again in a highly stylized and theatrically visual scene:

the moon, so dim hitherto, seemed to shine out somewhat brighter: a ray gleamed even white before me, and a shadow became distinct and marked. I looked more narrowly, to make out the cause of this well-defined contrast appearing a little suddenly in the obscure alley: whiter and blacker it grew on my eye: it took shape with instantaneous transformation. I stood about three yards from a tall, sable-robed, snowy-veiled woman. Five minutes passed. I neither fled nor shrieked. She was there still. I spoke. 'Who are you? and why do you come to me?' (370)

Again, this scene is lit by the sort of moon glow that was part and parcel of Robertson's theatrical effect. Notice also that Lucy is the one to speak first and that she assumes that she can discover a meaning (who? why?) in the visitations of the nun. She is compelled to read the nun as a text or a tradition that has meaning, whereas we learn by the end of the novel that the nun has no meaning apart from Lucy's compulsions to read her as a real personage with personal significance to her. Lucy appropriately describes the nun as having "no face—no features; all below her brow was masked with a white cloth; but she had eyes, and they viewed me" (370). The magic lantern show, in fact, is now firmly situated inside Lucy's head. The internalization of the gothic that occurs throughout Brontë's works is, I would claim, built on her knowledge of gothic stage technology, dramatic conventions, and phantasmagoric effects.

26. As Terry Castle has noted in regard to the emphasis on the spectralization of bodies in Radcliffe's novels, the late eighteenth century no longer distinguished the way earlier cultures did between "mental simulacra" and "real—if not material—objects of sense. At the end of the eighteenth century...phantasmatic objects had come to seem increasingly real: even more real at times than the material world from which they presumably derived" (134). The strange reappearance of the spectral nun who haunts Lucy actually conforms to what Castle describes as "a new spectralized mode of perception, in which one sees through the real person, as it were, towards a perfect and unchanging spiritual essence. Safely subsumed in this ghostly form, the other can be appropriated, held close, and cherished forever in the ecstatic confines of the imagination" (136).
27. The third and final appearance of the nun occurs as Lucy and M. Paul are walking together and he declares his intentions to pursue Lucy as the doubled female version of himself: "'we are alike,—there is affinity. Do you see it mademoiselle, when you look in the glass?'" (460). The conversation shifts next to the legend of the nun,—connected as it must be for M. Paul with his dead fiancé Justine-Marie. As Lucy and Paul muse on the nun's reality, Nature speaks as it always does at climactic moments in Brontë novels:

Yes, there scarce stirred a breeze, and that heavy tree was convulsed, whilst the feathery shrubs stood still. For some minutes amongst the wood and leafage a rending and heaving went on. Dark as it was, it seemed to me that something

more solid than either night-shadow, or branch-shadow, blackened out of the boles. At last the struggle ceased. What birth succeeded this travail? What Dryad was born of these throes? We watched fixedly. A sudden bell rang in the house—the prayer bell. Instantly into our alley there came . . . an apparition, all black and white. With a sort of angry rush—close, close past our faces,—swept swiftly the very NUN herself! Never had I seen her so clearly. She looked tall of stature, and fierce of gesture. As she went, the wind rose sobbing; the rain poured wild and cold; the whole night seemed to feel her. (461)

The references here to wind and rain are both highly recognizable recourses to conventions in Robertson's gothic technology, and it is also important to note here that the forest was one of the stock gothic settings developed as a visual extravaganza by Loutherbourg. In fact, one of his specialties was the creation of lightning during a storm. Using a cut sky cloth behind which the lightning could travel, Loutherbourg simulated the shock of lightning by shaking a thin sheet of copper suspended on a chain. In order to create the sense of traveling through a forest at night, Loutherbourg also created a number of different views of the forest, each of which was then superimposed on the earlier painted drop-cloth and lit solely by the footlights (Ranger 30-31; cf. Allen). Similarly, for his gothic drama *Bertram* (1816), Maturin created a collage of sound-effects as background: the roar of the sea, signals of distress from a ship, and the regular rhythm of the tolling of a monastery bell, and it was the tolling of the bell that was to become a stock gothic sound effect in dozens of theatrical productions throughout the nineteenth century (Ranger 33).

28. But note also the sudden and dramatic appearance of the optical illusion herself. The bell rings and the nun appears. One is tempted to observe that there is something vaguely Pavlovian about the appearances of the nun. She is born like a force of nature; she springs full-grown from the branches of a tree. She is more than human; she is inhuman. She is something; she is nothing. There is no nun, of course, only an effeminate man cross-dressing as a nun in order to court Genevra, and this deflation would appear to be Brontë's critique of the gothic brooding nun in the magic lantern show. She slyly suggests that the fears and fantasies that the gothic has produced exist ultimately within the imagination and nowhere else.
29. Other aspects of a phantasmagoria can be seen in Lucy's visits to the art gallery, where literal paintings are thrown up for Lucy's view, much like the transparencies that were projected in Robertson's sensational shows. In the first instance, the viewing of the painting of Cleopatra, Lucy confronts a representation of the gothic anti-heroine, fleshly, seductive, wanton, and embarrassing:

It represented a woman, considerably larger, I thought, than the life. I calculated that this lady, put into a scale of magnitude suitable for the reception of a commodity of bulk, would infallibly turn from fourteen to sixteen stone. She was, indeed, extremely well fed: very much butcher's meat—to say nothing of bread, vegetables, and liquids—must she have consumed to attain that breadth and height, that wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh....She had no business to

lounge away the noon on a sofa. She ought likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly, which was not the case. (250)

Lucy herself is repulsed by this representation of woman in the flesh and cools her eyes by making a hasty retreat and viewing instead "little pictures of still life" (251). The still life is precisely what Lucy is after for herself, but before she realizes that she is led by M. Paul over to a four-paneled visual tableaux: "La vie d'une femme." Each one of these paintings presents a model young woman at a crucial stage in her life. In the first, "Juene Fille," Lucy notes that the young girl is leaving the church, missal in hand, "her eyes cast down, her mouth pursed up—the image of a most villainous little precocious she-hypocrite." In the second picture, a bride prays before being led to the slaughter, and in the third, the young mother, she contends with "a clayey and puffy baby with a face like an unwholesome full moon." In the fourth and final picture a widow and her daughter survey a military monument to their illustriously dead husband and father. Lucy tells us that the entire panorama presents women as "grim and gray as burglars, and cold and vapid as ghosts. What women to live with! insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless non-entities! As bad in their way as the indolent gipsy-giantess, the Cleopatra" (253). If women who conform to patriarchal standards are condemned, and women who rebel to seize power are also rejected as freaks, then where does that leave the women of *Villette*? Brontë here and elsewhere throughout her oeuvre practices a species of what Barthes has called "neither-norism." And clearly it is the shape and destiny of the female body that forms the locus of anxiety in Brontë's novelistic universe.

30. In an uncanny and almost predictive manner, Brontë appears to be anticipating the spectralization of the female body that now dominates contemporary media depictions of anorexic victims with ever shrinking frames. In some eerie way, Brontë has sensed this patriarchal double-bind by positioning the fleshly, huge body of Cleopatra (female power as nauseating visual display) against representations of shrinking, miniaturized female bodies safely confined to the acceptable and ever shrinking boxes of the home. Again, however, we are struck by the sheer visual hyperbole, the flashing of images on the mind of Lucy and the reader, recalling as they do the phantasmagoric magic lantern show, this time used as a critique of the patriarchy's stultifying construction of "woman." Lucy has effectively rejected both options held out to women by her society. She is repulsed by the flesh and blatant sexuality of Cleopatra as thoroughly as she is by the domestic idyll (sexuality safely contained and disciplined) of the "juene fille." Both options are alternately ghastly or ghostly to her. In a manner that recalls what Castle noted about the body in Radcliffe's novels, "what ... shows so plainly—could we perhaps begin to acknowledge it—is the denatured state of our own awareness: our antipathy toward the body and its contingencies, our rejection of the present, our fixation on the past (or yearnings for an idealized future), our longing for simulacra and nostalgic fancy. We are all in love with what isn't there" (137).
31. But female bodies are, in fact, all over the text of *Villette*. In the next representation of woman thrown like a visual projection up on a stage, the performance of Vashti on stage as suffering woman incarnate, Lucy is confronted with yet another possibility, this time of a slightly veiled gothic anti-heroine. As she observes the performance of Vashti, Lucy muses:

Pain, for her, has no result in good; tears water no harvest of wisdom: on sickness, on death itself, she looks with the eye of a rebel. Wicked, perhaps, she is, but also she is strong; and her strength has conquered Beauty, has overcome Grace, and bound both at her side, captives peerlessly fair, and docile as fair. Even in the uttermost frenzy of energy is each maenad movement royally, imperially, incedingly upborne. Her hair, flying loose in revel or war, is still an angel's hair, and glorious under a halo. Fallen, insurgent, banished, she remembers the heaven where she rebelled. Heaven's light, following her exile, pierces its confines, and discloses their forlorn remoteness. (322-23)

In the presence of this show of female power, this performance of epic female rebellion and suffering, anger and retribution, what does Lucy do? She looks at a man, her escort Dr. Graham, for his reaction: "In a few terse phrases he told me his opinion of, and feeling towards, the actress: He judged her as a woman, not an artist: it was a branding judgment" (325). The fact that someone shortly yells, "Fire!" and clears the theater does not deny the denigration and ambivalence that Brontë has displayed here toward female passion and suffering, the two well-springs that she has tapped in her own artistry.

IV. Revenants

This further is to be observed, concerning ideas lodged in the memory, and upon occasion revived by the mind, that they are not only (as the word revive imports) none of them new ones, but also that the mind takes notice of them as of a former impression, and renews its acquaintance with them, as with ideas it had known before.

—John Locke, "Of Retention," *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (II.x)

32. The next flickering image that occurs in the novel is the strange scene of Lucy, *uber*-Protestant, lured into Madame Walraven's gothic abode. The exchange of fruit between the two women is straight out of Little Red Riding Hood, while the identity of Madame as "Malevola," the wicked witch, recalls all those phallic mothers who have tried to consume young gothic heroines since the time of Radcliffe. It is in the gothic underworld of Malevola that Lucy hears from Pere Silas the tale of the first Justine-Marie, M. Paul's lost and lamented beloved, a bleeding nun who quite possibly died giving birth to their daughter, Justine-Marie Sauveur. But the most uncanny scene in this very gothic lair occurs when Lucy waits in the entryway for Madame to appear, and she does, apparently stepping through the picture of the dead nun:

I was attracted by the outline of a picture on the wall. By-and-by the picture seemed to give way: to my bewilderment, it shook, it sunk, it rolled back into nothing; its vanishing left an opening, arched, leading into an arched passage, with a mystic winding stair; both passage and stair were of cold stone, uncarpeted and unpainted. Down this donjon stair descended a tap, tap, like a stick; soon, there fell on the steps a shadow, and last of all, I was aware of a substance.... Well might this old square be named quarter of the Magi, well might the three towers,

overlooking it, own for godfathers three mystic sages of a dead and dark art. Hoar enchantment here prevailed. (487)

The picture on the wall that suddenly rolls away, revealing the witch behind it, all of this highly visual presentation, I would contend, is straight out of the phantasmagoria. In fact, Brontë's novel uses two of the most prevalent scenic types in gothic drama: the medieval castle and the conventual church, the two most lasting models of "pure Gothic" architecture according to Richard Payne Knight (162). Both, however, could quickly be confused with Bastille-like prisons, which is exactly the slippery slope on which Brontë positions Lucy in *Villette*. One of the most famous castles on the gothic stage was the one designed by Thomas Greenwood the Elder for John Burgoyne's version of *Richard Coeur-de-Lion* (1786). This castle consisted of a number of different levels including a raised terrace, a moat, fortifications and a drawbridge, and a high tower topped with a parapet (Ranger, 44-45). Such a structure was actually meant to mimic the castle that George III was building for his family at Kew, but it is also very reminiscent of the sort of house that Madame Walraven inhabits.

33. The final and perhaps most important use of magic lantern conventions occurs during the midnight fête scene. Lucy's emotions are heightened by the drug that Madame administers as a sedative, but rather than produce the desired effect, the drug unleashes Lucy's long-buried emotions. After taking the drug, Lucy's "Imagination was roused from her rest, and she came forth impetuous and venturous....'Rise!' she said. 'Sluggard! this night I will have *my* will; nor shalt thou prevail. Look forth and view the night!' was her cry" (562; Brontë's emphasis). In other words, the magic lantern show in Lucy's head is finally in full operation, and she recapitulates all of the actions of the novel in all of their phantasmagoric intensity. Lucy is led almost magnetically to the park, and within the park she becomes engaged in trying to locate the huge stone basin filled with cool water, a pool in which the "moon supreme" was brilliantly reflected (562). Lucy states, "My vague aim, as I went, was to find the stone-basin, with its clear depth and green lining" (568). This pool, a "circular mirror of crystal . . . [with] the moon glassing therein her pearly font" becomes the final mirror in which Lucy attempts to see reflected the working of her own psyche. The pool functions quite literally as a mirror, but this symbol of mimetic perception is here combined with the moon, traditionally the symbol of the romantic and projective imagination.
34. The climax of the novel would appear to be Lucy's confrontation with M. Paul's ward, the young Justine-Marie. But just as Lucy's new emotionalism cannot be repressed, neither can it be trusted in the culminating and most dramatic epistemological moment of the novel: understanding the significance and identity of Justine-Marie, with whom both the spectral nun and M. Paul's deceased fiancé have been associated. Lucy now confronts in Justine-Marie an aspect of herself, long hidden: "I had seen this spectre only through a glass darkly; now was I to behold it face to face....my life stood still" (579-80). I cite the climactic passage in full:

It is over. The moment and the nun are come. The crisis and the revelation are passed by. The flambeau glares still within a yard, held up in a park-keeper's hand; its long eager tongue of flame almost licks the figure of the Expected, there,

where she stands full in my sight! What is she like? What does she wear? How does she look? Who is she? There are many masks in the Park to-night, and as the hour wears late, so strange a feeling of revelry and mystery begins to spread abroad that scarce would you discredit me, reader, were I to say that she is like the nun of the attic, that she wears black skirts and white head-clothes, that she looks the resurrection of the flesh, and that she is a risen ghost. All falsities, all figments! We will not deal in this gear. Let us be honest, and cut, as heretofore, from the homely web of truth. *Homely*, though, is an ill-chosen word. What I see is not precisely homely. A girl of Villette stands there . . . (589; her emphasis)

The clue here to the theatrical residue is the reference to "Flambeau glares" and "flames" licking around the figure of the nun-*manque*. Lucy wants to read Justine-Marie as the phantom nun. She wants to be able to tell us that Justine-Marie was dressed in a nun's habit because she thinks that she could then solve the riddle of her life, just as Brontë would like to be able to internalize and thereby control the gothic tropes that haunted her as well as her culture. But it is not to be. Justine-Marie is just a "bourgeoise belle" (580), and the triumph of realism has been reified before Lucy's very startled eyes. The dark glass that Lucy imagines herself looking into stands as a reflection of her theatricalized perceptions and is a contrast to the clear pool that reflects the moon. Lucy has been allowed to enter the temple of Truth and lift the veil, but she does not interpret correctly. Jealousy and "Fancy" mislead her. Ironically, she embraces a lie while vehemently declaring it to be her "good mistress" (583-84).

35. The delirium, the loss of consciousness, the inability to interpret visual stimuli correctly, and the terrifying consequences of having failed to interpret identities clearly—all are characteristics of being in the realm of the phantasmagoric. For the later romantic poets like Poe, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud, "the phantasmagoria was a favorite metaphor for the heightened sensitivities and often-tormented awareness of the romantic visionary. It conveyed exquisitely the notion of the *bouleversement de tous les sens*: that state of neurasthenic excitement in which images whirled chaotically before the inward eye, impressing on the seer an overwhelming sense of their vividness and spiritual truth" (Castle 159).
36. Charlotte Brontë places Lucy, her final creative accomplishment, in an ultimately ambiguous and unknowable universe. Lucy internalizes the magic lantern show because Brontë wanted to believe that all of life's experiences ultimately occur within the mind. The body is consistently elided in this text, or at least such a goal would appear to be Brontë's intention. As Castle observes, there is a "profound epistemological confusion" (159) in the century and it was represented by the uncanny way that mental images could correspond with spectral realities. Seeking to secularize and rationalize superstitions about ghosts and the afterlife, the phantasmagoria did not exorcise them, but actually "internalized and reinterpreted [ghosts] as hallucinatory thoughts....By relocating the world of ghosts in the closed space of the imagination, one ended up supernaturalizing the mind itself" (161). But I would claim that somewhere, in the dim theater of the brain, someone will always be screaming "fire" and Brontë will wish that she lived in the sort of world where she could save herself by simply imagining that she has run safely out the door.

